

DARK HORIZONS



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DARK horizons

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The front cover is from Dietterlin's "Architectura" (edition of 1598).

Derleth As I Knew Him

PART 2

BY RAMSEY CAMPBELL

Back to the letters. On publication of THE INHABITANT OF THE LAKE I became "Dear John" and he undertook to advise me more paternally on films:

11.6.64 "Well, in time you may learn to appreciate TOM JONES more than you do now. I recall my own impatience and intransigence as a youth, and HPL said virtually the same thing to me, and of course he was right."

He wasn't right on this occasion, but that's not the real point of the quote. Perhaps the whole cycle is that of Derleth's PEABODY HERITAGE: after I am dead, who will turn me over? or rather, what young writer may I take under my wing? At any rate, this sort of apprenticeship may go some way toward explaining why there is such a sense of tradition in fantasy.

Here's a possible explanation of Derleth's dislike of fans:

20.6.64 "One of the crosses established authors and editors must bear is smart kids of from 8 to 30 who, having read a little about a subject, think they know it all and have become authorities, capable of carping intelligently at the writing they read."

Although Derleth was a liberal conservative (at least, that's the way I read him) politics seldom found their way into our letters. Except in one darkly prophetic instance:

7.11.64 "Thank heaven the election is over at last! I hope now that Goldie and the incredible Nazi Dean Burch and Miller and Nixon will crawl back into the woodwork, and the Republican Party can rebuild with younger, more moderate men, away from the stupid extremists!"

Strangely, although his opinion of critics in general was low, he could embrace their opinions for convenience:

20.1.65 I wasted no time on THE CARPETBAGGERS, though the movie was certainly better than the book, which was typical of its kind of fiction. It couldn't have been as bad. I didn't read the book, either, but read enough of the reviews to know."

Reading through the file now I encounter a comment that seems ironic in retrospect - a demonstration of the importance of timing in publishing:

11.3.65 "Re Mervyn Peake - he is in

very bad health and in a very bad way financially, I understand, if indeed he hasn't passed on. I heard from mutual friends, who had wanted Arkham to republish him over here, but that was simply impossible, for neither of us would have made any money, and I'd have lost heavily, since these are long novels."

It was around this time that fragments of Derleth's philosophy and experience began to appear in his letters, perhaps because he considered me old enough to take them:

8.10.65 "Women are more disillusioning than any other human experience for a man. I could recite a long list of them, beginning with Lillian (the Margery of EVENING IN SPRING) and carrying right down almost to the present. Much as I enjoy the fair sex and their company - and they certainly reciprocate that enjoyment - I tend now to prefer the company of my own sex. A sign, I suppose, of middle age, but in a sense this was always true. Much as I liked the girls, I found that my friendships with members of my own sex took deeper root. Yet I am still in touch with all my former girl-friends. Indeed, this month I am publishing a book by one of them to whom I was once engaged."

Also, more distressingly, intimations appeared of his approaching collapse, even in a Christmas vignette:

18.12.65 "I am always glad when the holidays are over - the pressures and tensions increase every year, and my ability to take it all decreases with age. Mother is baking cookies today, with April to help her - Rikki is typing the final draft of the new pastiche for magazine submission - and I am catching up on the mails, much of which had to be put by until I got the new story off - and the last story for some time, too! I have been so tied down here that I've had little chance for an escape!"

Early in the following year another warning shadow suggested itself:

14.1.66 "After I got off THE WATCHER ON THE HEIGHTS for Fall 1966 publication, I plunged into a new anthology of regional writing, A WISCONSIN HARVEST, and this has now been completed apart from preparing it for publication, did another Solar Pons tale, revised one book of poems, put together another, and now face another junior novel! It's getting to be too much for me, actually."

But his no-nonsense style at least didn't suffer:

21.4.66 "I went to one of convention - in Chicago in 1952, and though I was but 43 then, I thought it too infantile for words. I have never had any good argument to change my mind. Evidently authors go for adulation from the fans, and the fans go to make themselves seen and

known if possible. I found the 1952 convention teeming with queers of all kinds... as for the closing party, it was too much of a drunken brawl to interest me, so I slipped away and went to a good movie. Let those who like that sort of thing enjoy it, but I feel that my time is just too valuable to waste in this manner. Insularity is the keynote, yes. And fandom over here is so full of homosexuals that the ratio might be as high as 50/50 - and the most obnoxious kind, too. I prefer quiet types, on the whole, and not raving fruits and shouting queens, eager to advertise themselves as for sale."

And he could

still enjoy his landscape:

24.5.66 "Yours of the 15th has lain here a few days unanswered; we are in the midst of the morel season here, and hunting these mushrooms is just about my only holiday - and a very felicitous one, for it takes me into the countryside when the shad, wild plum, apple, lilac, and wild cherries are in full bloom, when the warbler family moves through on its way to northern hunting grounds (save for those that stay here to nest), and though the hunting is strenuous (often five hours a day up hill and down) I usually end up feeling much more in tone, off weight (I've taken off 15 lbs. so far) and generally more fit to cope with the problems that arise (such as a bout with the Internal Revenue Service, whose auditors thought they could gouge more money out of me on my 1964 income tax report, with the unhappy result - for them - that they ended up owing me \$79.00!). But just now it is raining - I am expecting Don Wandrei in to help hunt mushrooms for a day or two - and I am catching up on the mail, as you see."

And

become acerbic over puffery:

20.9.66 "Alas! I must go to receive a Governor's award on Saturday - service to the arts or some such thing. One of those things which would have been welcome on the way up the ladder, but now that I'm up is useless. There may be some publicity in it, but I doubt that there's any useful publicity."

Then ("Year's End, 1966") came the duplicated letter reporting a digestive upset, a persistent virus infection of the lung, and a coronary.

"The hospital sojourn has delayed the whole damned writing and publishing programme" he protested. Of course, he was supposed to ease up on himself. Of course he didn't, and in the context of his impending death the following is both comic and tragic:

17.3.67 "In regard to THE HORROR FROM THE MIDDLE SPAN - when I got out of hospital and looked over everything that remained to be done, I

knew I would have to dispense with something; so I chose to dispense with the HPL pastiche. However, in my tight schedule - and after the title had been deleted from many of the stocklists - one of my publishers allowed a vacuum to develop; this occurred on a Sunday, and therefore on that free day I did the HORROR and it will be in the book anyway. (The annoying fellow fell through the next Sunday also, thus giving me time for an entire short book - WALDEN POND: HOMAGE TO THOREAU.)"

And here is where I bow my head. In moving house I must have lost three years' worth of letters. Perhaps they'll turn up. I hope so, for the letters are Derleth as I knew him, and as such they mean a good deal to me.

The astonishing aspect - no, not astonishing: with Derleth it was inevitable - is that in terms of the letters there's no sense of a three-year gap. Here he is, battling bluffly on and still advising me:

30.4.71 "It is folly to do original work in paperback; you not only lose status, but no hardcover publisher will then want to take you on. Certainly, if DEMONS came out in paperback first, before we contracted for it, we'd not do the book; and its life would then be about six months, which certainly does you no good. Ambitious agents, eager for a fast buck, often persuade authors to let them sell paperback rights before hardcover publication; the result is that more than one v. promising author is without a publisher of status. I think of Mildred Clingerman particularly; she did some truly excellent tales, but her agent conned her into paperback, after which no hardcover publisher would take her work; and she is practically unknown today."

And

cutting an author down to size:

24.5.71 "...whose concept of his sales-worth is phenomenal; he evidently rates himself and his work above Dunsany, Blackwood, James, the Bensons, Machen, de la Mare - you name the author - and made such impossible demands when we broached the subject of a book of his best stories that I told his agent by return we had abruptly lost interest in the thought of doing his book. I wished him luck in finding an American publisher to meet his demands, but he won't. He'll have to scale himself and his demands down."

And

that, abruptly, is all. The table on which I've been sorting the letters is bare. There's one more letter, but that merely sets out the projected Arkham House schedule. No goodbye: Derleth is dead.

Don't tell me that this has been a collection of disorganized fragments. I know that. But I wanted you to meet Derleth as I knew him, not my interpretation. I hope we'll have the chance to meet Derleth as others knew him.

There were many of us, and most were testaments to his influence. Perhaps one day we'll see a book composed of all those Derleths. It'll have to be a hell of a big book; it will doubtless annoy many readers with its contradictions. And that is how it should be.

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THE COSMIC IN FICTION ***

***** DAVE SUTTON *****

And now for something completely different: Monty Python
My Guitar wants to Kill your Mama: Frank Zappa
'I know' shouted Tiny Clanger. 'Blue String Pudding':
The Clangers
Ph'nglui Hglw'nafh Cthulhu Rl'yeh Wgah'nagl Fhtagn:
H.P. Lovecraft

The human imagination, apparently, know no boundaries and thus, Fantasy, stemming from the imagination, is restricted only by the technicalities of whichever medium it is executed in. Therefore, Fantasy, as a genre, is a very large one. Not a minority feature, its tentacles spread polymorphically throughout the artistic world. It is not a poor second to Science Fiction, as some aficionados of that medium would have us believe (it does in fact envelop the sub-genre SF), neither is it the stagnant puddle in an ocean of literature. It is the single most important aspect in literature; writing would be a poor little medium without Fantasy, for it is the greatest innovation in the literary field. In films, music and art too, Fantasy, which is generally regarded with contempt or filed neatly away as a minority interest, is the profoundest asset these media have; because the genre is the human imagination and therefore the most utterly cosmic form in which the artist can work.

Boundaries for the genre are inevitably drawn, yet the devotee must explode his walls of doubt until he really does see how stupendous the field is. For instances of restrictive practices, take the average SF fan's bigoted approach to 'New-Wave' SF. The constant argument was, was it SF? Quite frankly, it was Fantasy and its associations more often than not related to the outré than to the closer-knit SF sub-genre.

Fanzines tend to specialize quite stringently and draw boundaries as to exactly which aspect of the field they wish to discuss. I'm certainly not against this: by all means deal with whichever aspect you wish, but do not deny the existence of the vast ocean of types that inhabit the field.

This brings me to the quotes at the beginning of this article, which are merely to stimulate the reader into broadening his horizons. The BBC's Monty Python's Flying Circus for instance, is to my mind not only a better but directly a truer form of Fantasy than many a Hammer horror film. The Clangers, Oliver Postgate's delightful stop-motion animated SF is better and more basically stimulating than the often wishy-washy Star Trek. The genre in music is possibly the most exciting, with a vast range of types: classical, semi-classical, progressive; and often very bizarre it is too, though as the universal language music has far-reaching properties, and often the Fantasy aspects are as respected as anything else.

In searching for meaningful values in Fantasy I would define "cosmic" as the essence of the artist's search for something special in Mankind's existence. This something is a grasping for the universe, the gulfs of time and space that seem a mighty power, a longing for the god-like region that will be his.

I have taken Literature to set out my examples below.

In the strictly literary sense, we have a genre that is choc-a-bloc with contemporary crap, although it has many gems of real cosmic essence, and it is these that highlight the meaning of Fantasy - a preoccupation with unobtainable desires: the quest for the Universe. Writers in all ages have sought this. Early heroic writers like Morris and Eddison sought after it, Lovecraft, Smith and Leiber sank it in cosmic-horror, Bradbury often attains it and Colin Wilson fills us with its essence. In SF we have the cosmic apparent in such pieces as Richard Cowper's Breakthrough and Brian Aldiss' An Age.

An Age has a timelessness about it, 'the relationship between Man and Time...' a rather intangible quality. It is a marvellous story and certainly brings one closer to the visions I will attempt to outline in this essay. The novel opens with a beautifully descriptive passage..."They proliferated on the margins of time, embodying all the amazing forms the world was to carry, they stretched as far as the eye could see, piled on top of each other, as if they filled the entire Cryptozoic... or as if they were the sinister fore-shadowings of what was to come come as well as the after-images of what was long past."

suppose it was William Hope-Hodgson who, arguably, more than anyone else, squeezed the cosmic into a cyclopean force, a burning, passionate novel, The House on the Borderland. Hodgson's impressive work stands on the thin line somewhere between this world and the swirling Universe. It was first published in 1908 and gives us an unparalleled journey through light-years of space. It was as if Hodgson had taken the simplistic haunted house gambit and turned it head-over-heels into a phantasmagoric extravaganza, a pure piece of cosmic fiction. Hodgson had, as it were, anticipated Lovecraft's similar viewpoint but had, unlike Lovecraft who brought his cosmicism to Earth with adherent horrors, taken us outward, beyond the purely terrifying into the ecstatically electrifying!

Mervyn Peake's intrinsic cosmic-mindedness is buried deep in his Titus trilogy, within the crumbling, but space-like tracts, of Gormenghast, and even Derleth had a snippet of it in The Lurker at the Threshold. Tollmien, of course, like the heroic sagas, is always subtly aware of it, though like Peake, it is often lost within the circuitous threads of plot and sub-plot.

Because

the majority of human beings are not able to obtain the god-like quality (in this context nothing to do with religion whatsoever) which Colin Wilson frequently discusses, authors (poets, artists, composers, film directors), since they have the spiritual knack, can give us a brief glimpse at these expanses, even sometimes a more prolonged view, and this is what is really interesting about the Fantasy genre.

Ray

Bradbury is a past-master at the art of touching the cosmic filaments in our minds, not to mention our moral and emotional ones! In The Rocket Man he writes, "I kneaded the dark stuff in my warm hands; I smelled the planet Mars, and the planet Venus, a green ivy smell, and the planet Mercury, a scent of sulphur and fire; and I could smell the milky moon and the hardness of stars." He is in fact talking about the touch of a black uniform, but could easily have been clutching symbolically at a very personal Universe. In The Third Expedition (from THE MARSIAN CHRONICLES) Bradbury writes: "It came from the stars and the black velocities, and the shining movements, and the silent gulfs of space. It was a new ship; it had fire in its body and men in its metal cells, and it moved with a clean silence, fiery and warm." One could probably go on discussing Bradbury's very real contribution to Cosmic fiction for many more pages, since it is in fact difficult to find him being other than a cosmicist, his writing so poetic and so wrapped up in us as human beings on fresh, new quests.

By looking at the work of Clark Ashton Smith, I prefer to take his superb prose-poems, completely

anthologised by Arkham House in his POEMS IN PROSE, whose dust-wrap reads, "These poems illustrate beyond cavil Smith's extraordinary fertility of inventive imagination...his unique cosmic perspective...." Smith's stories are widely anthologized in paper and hard covers and many of them are exemplary of style and art. His prose poems are even more magical; they are all short, and tell brief but poignant tales of far-off lands and worlds, of people, things and horrors unknown... "I was at length aware of certain small and scattered gleams of silver, apparently far beneath the surface. And fancying them the metal in some mysterious ledge, or the glints of long-sunken treasure, I bent closer in my eagerness and finally perceived that what I saw was but the reflection of the stars, which, though the day was full upon the mountains, were yet visible in the depth and darkness of that enshadowed place." (from The Black Lake). And from The Crystals "...but soon the light was centered to a star, and the crystal itself, as if pregnant with the Infinite, became a tenebrous and profound abyss..." His poems are each a little cosmos, miniature worlds, beautifully wrought worlds, but above all the worlds of wonder and dreams. The Crystals details a marvellous vision, an immeasurable gulf within a crystal that is not only an objective, but a subjective chasm, a vision of the unconscious mind. The Mirror in the Hall of Ebony is the dream of a mirror that reveals all one's past life, both its torments and its happier times. "From the nethermost profound of slumber, from a gulf beyond the sun and stars that illume the Lethean shoals and the vague lands of somnolant visions, I floated on a black unripling tide to the dark threshold of a dream.". Like many of Smith's poems in prose it has an eloquent aura of timelessness, a closed world where time is nothing but a dim memory, time is one with space. In A Phantasy he says " - a land remote in ulterior time and alien space not ascertainable...upon which has settled the bleak, irrevocable silence of infinitude." These works often have a dirge-like flavour, but beyond is the intangible permanence of the infinitely cosmic.

In Fritz Leiber's A Bit of the Dark World, there is the Lovecraftian 'Hostile Universe', but besides being one of the very best stories of cosmic horror, it also holds a terrifying feeling of cosmic outreness. Beginning with three people staying at the cliff-top 'Rim House', Leiber develops a unique "monster", a veritable bit of the dark world! "I got a hint of the stupendous distance between me and the stars, and then - as if my vision could go out in all directions at will, piercing solidity as well as the dark - I got a lasting, growing, wholly absorbing sense of the universe around me." And: "For the sense of a presence looming around and over Rim House was overpoweringly strong. Dipping into Rim House now too, for all the minor sensations came drifting down on us like near-impalpable snow flakes - the dark burnt taste and smell, the fluttering cobwebs, the bat sounds and the wave sounds and once again the feathery spills of gravel... and above and behind

them the sense of a black uprearing presence linked to the whole cosmos by the finest black filaments that in no way impeded it..." Leiber's story is a very special one, because it aims intrinsically at the ideas I am trying to expound. Many other tales achieve this impact, but A Bit of the Dark World almost seems to circumscribe this idea. It is an excellent example simply because it is such a good Fantasy story; it in effect 'proves the theory'.

Another of Leiber's horror stories, The Black Gondolier tries to use oil as its 'universal' horror and in so doing tries to give a more outré feel to the story. It didn't work in The Man who made Friends with Electricity, due to a comic approach, but Leiber's more serious treatment in The Black Gondolier makes for a much more plausible story. One feels Leiber is still working around the same theme, but he doesn't succeed very well, the creature turning out to be the silly ectoplasmic blob described earlier on in the tale, and not a less tangible but more cosmic horror.

H.P. Lovecraft does have an essential feeling about the Universe. However his was a negative view, a mindless and hostile Universe, but vast, awe-inspiring and extremely strange and close to us. In The Music of Erich Zann he very carefully brings together the awful madness of empty space and pandemonic music; "...but only the blackness of space illimitable; un-imagined space alive with motion and music and having no semblance of anything on Earth." Lovecraft's Universe was mechanical and dead, yet in this story it takes on a living aspect, it is very much alive and entrapt in a wild and unearthly music. However, just to show that the Universe bears bad fruit we have The Colour out of Space, a carefully worked out story of alien invasion, of a "colour" which brings awful death when it arrives on a meteorite. Lovecraft tried hard to hint, but not describe the "colour" and though this doesn't always work, he does try to attach to it a cosmic significance. "It was just a colour out of space - a frightful messenger from un-formed realms of infinity beyond all Nature as we know it; from realms whose mere existence stuns the brain and numbs us with the black extra-cosmic gulfs it throws open before our frenzied eyes."

The horror in Colour has been allegorised to the effects of radioactivity and thus the H-bomb, and though everything seems to point to this, it is in fact an insubstantial and alien parasite that feeds on life, reducing it to a crumbling grey ash. Because Lovecraft wrote about creatures and races from interstellar space, his tales often have a natural affinity with the cosmic in fiction, but more so than the typical SF writer's prosaic yarns of alien invasion. HPL's "sense" of the awful, awesome outer-spaces was truly significant.

This divination of Man's ultimate greatness, his vast beauty and the beauty of the Universe, the mother-womb in

which we live, is the really fascinating thing about Fantasy fiction. I'll leave off my thoughts here and offer my initial "Cosmic Reading Guide". This is by no means definitive, and merely mentions the stories I have discussed herein.

Novels

1. BREAKTHROUGH, by Richard Cowper (Ballantine)
2. AN AGE, by Brian Aldiss (Faber & Faber) (CRYPTOZOIC in paperback)
3. THE HOUSE ON THE BORDERLAND, by William Hope-Hodgson (Panther)
4. THE LURKER AT THE THRESHOLD, by August Derleth (Panther)

Stories

1. The Rocket Man in THE ILLUSTRATED MAN, by Ray Bradbury (Corgi)
2. The Third Expedition in THE SILVER LOCUSTS, by Ray Bradbury (Corgi)
3. The Black Lake, The Crystals, and The Mirror in the Hall of Ebony in POEMS IN PROSE, by Clark Ashton Smith (Arkham House)
4. A Bit of the Dark World in SHADOWS WITH EYES, by Fritz Leiber (Ballantine)
5. The Music of Erich Zann and The Colour out of Space in THE HAUNTER OF THE DARK, by H.P. Lovecraft (Panther)

Further titles

THE NINE PARASITES, by Colin Wilson (Panther);
THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE, by Colin Wilson (Arthur Barker);
THE LORD OF THE RINGS, by J.R.R. Tolkien (Allen & Unwin);
THE TITUS TRILOGY, by Mervyn Peake (Penguin).

In the above listing, I have where possible given the publisher for the most easily obtainable edition.

Belendon's chair

GORDON LARKIN



Fools and kings alike would journey from afar, to Belendon, to see the chair and they would add their own vague guesses to the mystery of its origin... for none amongst the living knew its secret. All memory of its coming into the fair city had been lost and the tales told of it were many and colourful.

Some said it was wrought in goldfire and gremmed with brightnesses chipped from the stars, all mounted on darkwood from the worlds' well. They held that it was brought together

in the gilded halls beyond the sun where dwell, in glory, all the gods of men. And Nimuran (who was their god) had set it in their city.

"It is his throne" they would say and it was, for them, a thing of deep sanctity.

Others spoke of it with less reverence, saying that, long ago, before ever Belendon was, a wild and ancient dragon was slain whilst soaring high and free above the Purple Hills, by a mighty sorcerer who knew well the bane of dragons. And from the creature's onyx heart the enchanter shaped a shimmering chair and endowed it with a great magick that any who sat thereon would witness all the horrors and beauties the dragon had known... and this seat had come to Belendon.

The fishermen and mariners who dwelt on the shores of the city laughed at all such stories, saying

"Many years since, the Sea-King was majestic from his blue-litten palace beneath the waves and cast over all of Belendon a spell of sleeping that none might witness his doings. Then with much music and singing in the air, the beautiful mer-folk carried forth from the waters an image carven of the ocean's flesh, and placed it within our city. It was fashioned in the likeness of Bhu-Cacacharal (for whom the sea-King mourns) who, yet, trundles wearily through the seas' deepest shadows. It is this image we call Belendon's Chair."

Despite the depth of the peoples' interest in the Chair, none had ever dared to sit upon it - though many had boasted so. On occasion (often the morning following such a boast) the sweet light of dawn would reveal, heaped inexplicably at the foot of the Chair, a pile of bleached and broken bones, and he who had boasted before would be seen no more in Belendon. Because of such occurrences as this the Chair was feared by a great many.

Those whose fear was greatest said that it was, in fact, a living, watchful creature; a fiend up from the agonies of Hell come to snatch souls from their midst. They begged that the Chair be smashed down and the pieces scattered far and deep - but no one ever dared.

A poet in the city, believed passionately that the Chair was a precious gift from the gods "...that we might, every one, wonder and enjoy the intricacies of imagination." But he was scorned and ignored as is the lot of poets.

Once, there chanced in Belendon an errant youth who, on hearing of the Chair and seeing its strangeness, was filled with a growing wonder.

"But why has no one ever sat upon it?" he asked. "Surely, immense though

it is, that is its reason for being and therein must lie the answer to its mystery."

The people shrugged and many frowned, angered by his intrusion.

"That may well be so" they said, "And it may not, but none will dare."

Wistfully, the youth eyed the strange carving before him. He was intrigued and said, calmly, "I will dare."

A corwd gathered about the Chair and, with a hushed expectancy, watched the young wanderer.

Slowly and with some pride, he climbed the steps to the seat, marvelling at the odd carvings about him. A thousand eyes, unblinkingly, fixed his progress and many hearts beat fast.

At the top he turned to face his watchers, and with an elaborate flourish... he sat down.

A sudden, short-lived gasp arose from the onlookers who had expected some mighty calamity on that sitting... but nothing happened. The youth was still, and there was a smile upon his lips.

A gull, in from the sea, circled above the crowd - curious - and screeched.

The Sitter looked out and upon all the faces angled towards him.

His smile blossomed to a sardonic grin and he slapped his knee. He laughed.

Loud.

And louder.

He stood up on the topmost step swaying such was the strength of his mirth and his laughter spun round Belendon.

Tears pouring down his cheeks, he stumbled from the steps pushing his way through the stunned people who stepped out of his way in amazement.

They watched him staggering and laughing along the streets of the city and out into the wood beyond.

In the sudden quiet they all looked on each other questioningly.

"He's mad," they said.

And he was!

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REVIEWS

THE YEAR'S BEST HORROR STORIES No.3 ed Richard Davies:
Sphere: 1973, 173pp. 30p.

Reviewed by Philip Payne

I must admit from the start that I am not a horror stories 'fan'. I have nothing against the genre in general, but these days there seem to be so few good stories written in the field. Usually the main impact of a horror story depends on some horrific revelation, and all-too-often nowadays this becomes obvious to the reader long before the denouement, thereby robbing the story of most of its effect.

Sadly this anthology is no exception to the general rule. For a start we have Eddy Bertin's 'Like Two White Spiders' - a very poor rewrite of 'The Beast with Five Fingers' - and Brian Lumley's 'Haggopian' - an uninspiringly standard Cthulhu Mythos story - which can hardly even justify the appellation of original.

The

two longest stories in the book - Robert Aickman's 'Pages from a Young Girl's Journal' and T.E.D. Klein's 'Events at Poroth Farm' - both appear in the time-honoured form of diary extracts. A difficult to read (though easy to write) format at the best, it is rarely successful. In both cases here the story becomes merely tedious as the atmosphere is insufficiently tense to sustain interest.

To my mind there are really only two stories of interest in the anthology. The first is Kenneth Pembroke's 'The Were Creature', an amusing tale giving a new twist on an old theme - though sadly the title gives the game away at once. The second is Kit Pedlar's 'The Long-Term Residents'. This latter is a poorly written story, but is interesting in that the horror is based on the contemporary framework of medical cybernetics.

Too often horror story writers seem to feel bound by tradition to write only of gothic castles and inhuman night-creatures; they seem unaware of the far more potent, and relatively unexplored, channels of horror in our modern society. Still, I am no horror fan; perhaps those who are still want this kind of book - I'd be interested to know. It would be interesting, though to see a horror anthology containing stories like Ellison's 'I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream'.

CONAN THE WARRIOR by Robert E. Howard: Sphere; 1973, 192pp.
50p.

Reviewed by Philip Payne

Probably most of the people reading this review have already made up their minds about this book. Although 'Conan' has long been unavailable in a British edition the phenomenal sales of the American paperback here makes me wonder if there is anyone in the whole country who has not read one, let alone BFS members. However for those who have been asleep for the past six years let me briefly explain.

Conan is a semi-literate barbarian from the Hyborian Age - after Atlantis but before Egypt - who lives by his natural wit, and his sword (a two-handed broadsword usually). Built in near godlike proportions- great height, massive thews, lightning agility - his main interests are the traditional wine, women and warring. Created in 1932 by Robert E. Howard he achieved instant popularity among the readers of 'Weird Tales' - although nothing like the popularity which was to come in 1967 with the first of the Lancer paperbacks.

In his lifetime Howard published 18 Conan stories, and a further 23 have appeared since written wholly or partly by Lin Carter, L.Sprague de Camp and Bjorn Nyberg, and based on Howard's notes and unfinished manuscripts. It was Howard's writing ability that put Conan above his contemporaries. Howard once said that he believed that Conan had existed and was 'ghost-writing' the stories from real events. True or not, Howard instilled a rare quality of believability into his character which the later writers have never equalled. It is because of this that the modern reader, despite his differences, can identify so readily with Conan- which, in turn explains his meteoric success in our escapist age.

The Conan stories, original and otherwise, were put into chronological order by Lancer, and cover his career from youth to old age (but not death). The present volume lies eighth in a series of twelve and deals with Conan in his late thirties. There are three stories - 'Red Nails', 'Jewels of Gwahlur', and 'Beyond the Black River' - but their plot is basically irrelevant. Suffice it to say that each is an original Howard story, and as such one of the best of the series.

Really the whole success of the book depends on the temperament of the individual reader. If you don't like 'heroic fantasy' or 'sword and sorcery' then you'll probably hate Conan; if you do like it, you'll probably love him. If you're not sure what it's all about, this is the best place to start.

The edition itself does have one drawback - the cover. The original Lancer-Frank Frazetta covers have been used, but due to

a different printing process have turned out terribly 'washed'. Still, apart from that and the purist's regret that Sphere didn't start at the beginning of the series, this is the edition we've been waiting for so long. I just hope, for Sphere's sake, that it's not too late.

MEKANIK DESTRUCTIV KOMPLANDOH by MAGMA, ARIEL 64397

Reviewed by Gordon Larkin

Third Movement of Theusz Hamtaahk:

"The judgement of humanity for all its cruelty, its dishonesty, its uselessness, its vulgarity, and its lack of humility. As predicted by the prophet Nebehr Gudhatt, moved and inspired by the Spirit of the Universe in its infinite wisdom."

This album is staggering! A little history first. MAGMA have made three albums - this being the third and the only one available in this land (they are French) which is a pity as the genesis of the fictional theme running through all their work is missed. Briefly, (and the sleeve notes tell this better) the story is set in the future - Earth is in a bad way, a Very Bad Way. A handful of goodies, failing to enlighten their fellow men and so save them from total degradation, depart the "planet seeking a better world. They call their new home KOBIAA and build a super-duper, harmonious society with a very high degree of technology - and all is well.

Years later, a couple of Earthies chance by KOBIAA and (with ulterior motives) persuade a group of Kobaians to go and 'propagate the essence of their philosophy and social organisation' on Earth. This ends the first movement.

The second deals with the missionaries' vain attempts and their inevitable imprisonment. A message is leaked and they are rescued by fellow Kobaians who threaten Earth with an Ultimate Weapon until the prisoners are released. Earth gives in and the Kobaians go home vowing never to bother with Earth again. So ends the second movement.

That all sounds pretty regular SF and, fictionally, it is. But musically MAGMA transcend any cliches (and anyway the lyrics are all in Kobaians!). I cannot comment on those former albums, not having heard them, but it is important to know the 'build-up' to this, the third movement.

To quote the composer, who bears the most potent name CHRISTIAN VANDER, "This work, written in all humility, is the story of NEBEHR GUDAHNT, a man who one day tells the Earth people that in order to save themselves from ultimate doom, to purify their minds and so have access to

Ultimate Existence, they must sacrifice their lives on Earth. But his message is far from being understood."

As I said before, all the lyrics are in Kobaian which, to my untrained ear sounds like a coarse German. There is even a lyric sheet which can be followed although it is easy to get lost. I cannot say if Vander's Kobaian is linguistically correct but it is most convincing and from the deep philosophy of this work, I could not doubt his integrity.

The theme is of spiritual awakening - similar to the developments of Colin Wilson's Faculty X. And there is even a slight (very slight) kindred with the essence of Bach's 'Jonathan Livingston Seagull.' Musically it is a difficult piece though its mantra-like sounds (Kobaian is a phonetic tongue) are successfully convincing. Unlike the former movements this is an optimistic piece and the optimism is infectious.

Although it is pointless (impossible) to try and classify this, I should try, in some way, to convey the type of music (Vander calls it ZEUHL MUSIK). There are elements of Pink Floyd and, of course, Hawkwind though they are much more sophisticated than the latter. Also, I can see a slight similarity with Oldfield's 'TUBULAR BELLS' - but all of that will probably mislead you.

Suffice to say again, it is staggering and as far as contemporary music goes, a very important L.P. Try and hear it.

HORTZ WLASIK KOBIA

THE GOLDEN VOYAGE OF SINBAD (Columbia Pictures; Producer Charles H. Scheer; Director Gordon Hessler; Special Visual Effects Ray Harryhausen)

Reviewed by David A. Sutton

Scheer and Harryhausen team up again in yet another mythological extravaganza. Not since Hammer Film's One Million Years BC (1966) have we seen Harryhausen's superb special effects and now he's back - back from the prehistoric era to the mythological, taking Sinbad out from The 7th Voyage of Sinbad (1958) into the kind of world he created in Jason and the Argonauts (1963). But this mythological world is topsy-turvy. The screenplay by Brian Clemens and Harryhausen goes to town in mixing mythic genres, and boy, are they mixed! There's a centaur and griffin from the Greek, a bronze, six-armed goddess (Shiva) of the Hindus, the fabled land of Lemuria and an underground Stonehenge remarkably like our own, surrounding a magical fountain.

This is not to denigrate the film in any way and for sheer entertainment, it's easily as good as other Harryhausen epics, though naturally enough the actors play second fiddle to the animated monsters. John Phillip Law as Sinbad has a good accent for his part though we most often find him battling it out with the variety of bizarre creatures, which include a female, wooden figurehead which detaches itself from the prow of a ship by the magic of the villain of the film, the sorcerer Koura. Tom Baker plays Koura and he comes through quite strongly as he ages with increasing rapidity after each magical exertion. Other characters waver just this side of the visible: Sinbad's crew are bawdy enough for a U certificate, The Vizier (Douglas Wilmer) remains hidden behind a golden mask during most of the film; Harount (Kurt Christian) as the idle lute-player adds humour and, of course, the sex angle ably portrayed by the blossoming bosom of Caroline Munro as Margiana, whose scantily, sillon clad form reveals throughout the tensest moments of the movie, sensual, glistening sweat on all exposed areas. As an added attraction for sexual deviants, there's her sacrifice to the centaur - half man, half horse - which, had it been an X certificate picture, could have had interesting results, but unfortunately the centaur is so big I doubt that he could have mounted her successfully. And anyway, as we see later from the profusion of skeletons - it's only for food that she's been left trapped in his caverns. Still, it's all good stuff.

Most fans will be going to see Harryhausen's work anyway and there's certainly some new things to see here. Most fascinating for me was the six-armed goddess, whom Harryhausen has dance to sitar music - quite a feat to do this without reducing the audience to out-of-place laughter, but he does it. Then, armed with six swords, the bronze lady attacks Sinbad's crew - and really, the work that must have gone into the animation here!

Like any self-respecting epic, the hero wins and the villain gets a cutlass through his guts. But, what of the film as a whole? I find it difficult, as with many animated pictures, to marry the live parts with the animated. The direction (other than the animated portions) has to be competent - especially in fight scenes where the actors fight nothing, after which the animator slaves to fit his models into the scene with laborious stop-motion photography. But overall, the acting didn't seem as strong as in, say, Jason and the Argonauts or Mysterious Island (1962), in the former the story may have been changed but the mythology remained static in the Greek tradition. In One Million Years BC there was no dialogue as such, since the actors played our ancestors, and as a film it was made entirely for the visual effects coupled with some nice scenery. The Golden Voyage of Sinbad has little of this quality, or lack of quality if your viewpoint opposes the purely visual in films. The purely visual is here, but unlike 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) there are no hidden meanings - Sinbad is enjoyable and worthy entertainment.

layouts



RAMSEY CAMPBELL

With the EC comics reaching people who'd never heard of them, through the films TALES FROM THE CRYPT (not bad) and VAULT OF HORROR (not good), it seems opportune to look at the horror comics. Or, to give them the name they've acquired to placate the censorious, mystery comics.

But first let's look back. We're allowed to do so by a publisher called East Coast Comix, for the reasonable price of \$1 an issue. They have dedicated themselves to producing facsimile reprints of the original ECs and a beautiful job they've made of it. Given the classic status of these comics, I'd like to examine those I've seen so far.

EC Classic Reprint No. 1 (CRYPT OF TERROR 1) almost sums up EC in thirty-two pages. Overall, what's most significant is the restraint of the whole thing. Considering the revulsion these comics caused, one searches in vain for the expected details of sadism. Admittedly "the black fury turned red... red... spurting red as I swung the cleaver" but that's all, and the panel is less explicit again. Since this was one of the last comics EC published before succumbing to the Comics Code, they could certainly have afforded to indulge themselves if that had been their intention. No, the source of the disturbing power of the best EC tales lies deeper.

But the appeal of the first story lies elsewhere. You often enjoy an EC story in the same way as you enjoy a detective story: it's a game between reader and author for anticipation of the payoff. EC played fair, and even the title of this story - UPON REFLECTION - is there to be picked up. Apart from its narrative skill, this one gains from Davis' depiction of mob hysteria, a favourite EC theme. BLIND ALLEYS was used in the Freddie Francis film, of course, and it's instructive to compare them: Evans' way with squalor and misery is more telling, although he doesn't gloat, and the characterisation of the abominable villain is both less equivocal and more economical. The finale, which is built up to at length as if (rightly) defying the reader to see what's coming, is an especially grisly bit of poetic justice with none of the detached presentation with which Derleth, for example, would have hedged it. Bradbury fans will appreciate the tribute paid in the final line. SUCCESS STORY is an obsessive satire on materialism and family politics, drawn by Orlando in a deadpan realistic style that justifiably makes it unbearable. And TATTER UP is an extraordinary grotesque piece even for Ghastly Graham Ingles, who destroys the cheap romantic dialogue by placing it in the mouths of a hoodlum and a human gargoyle.

(Incidentally, this reverses Frazetta's method in his EC tale SQUEEZE PLAY). This story begins as a typical EC satire on Hollywoodish fakery but ends in total surrealism. A good issue if you want a representative sample.

Sadly, I can't say the same of the second reprint, WEIRD SCIENCE 15. The first story, THE MARTIANS, is ably drawn by Wood, but its punch line is reached by so convoluted a process that it seems hardly worth the effort. Also, once directed at the future Gaines'/Feldstein's ear for dialogue clogs up, and the characters are liable to become ponderously pompous, as in "One would think that at this junction of canals a settlement might have existed at one time". Similarly, Williamson's art in CAPTIVITY is graceful (though the faces of his characters, like Wood's, tend to fluctuate) but although the ending is spelled out on the penultimate page it's still thundered at us in heavy capitals as if we weren't expecting it. However, MISCALCULATION has an extra touch of irony to follow its inevitable conclusion, and it's drawn by the maligned Jack Kamen with what I'd call an infectious sense of the humour of the tale. And BUM STEER has Orlando's sense of horror to give point to a typical EC satire on man's treatment of animals. I've always felt EC were least successful with sf, but I wouldn't blame collectors for ignoring me.

Reprint no. 3, SHOCK SUSPENSTORIES 12, begins with Kamen's DEADLINE. One of the foundations of the Comics Code was the charge that comics depicted crime seductively. Not at EC they didn't, where crime was always messy, squalid and self-destructive. As can be seen in DEADLINE, where the ironic ending is predictable enough but is given greater weight by the final page. Admittedly Kamen's approach to squalor was timid in terms of EC, as can be seen from Orlando's THE MONKEY. An odd story for EC, overtly moralistic, flimsy in its psychological basis and inaccurate in its treatment of drugs (one joint and "I was hooked"). Its relentless progress into degradation is nevertheless powerfully presented. THE KIDNAPPER is a sad, disturbing little piece, reminiscent in its treatment of social hypocrisy and mob violence of another Reed Crandall story, A KIND OF JUSTICE (one of the most genuinely horrifying of all EC tales). Again, the ending turns the screw tighter than perhaps we were expecting. As for FALL GUY, it's a good short story and reaches an expected ending in an unexpected way, which is skillfully hidden in plain sight early on. Stylish Wood art communicates an appropriate mood of growing despair.

Reprint no. 4, HAUNT OF FEAR 12, hasn't reached me yet, although the next one, WEIRD FANTASY 13, has. The first story, Wood's THE END, begins as flat documentary and ends as one of sf's great shaggy dog stories. THE TRIP does suffer a little from Kamen's romance-comic style, but this is perhaps appropriate to its final surreal image of lost

icy perfection. Hints of Bradbury in Wood's Second piece, HOME TO STAY, and a poignantly ironic last page, but the repetitions of the rest of the plot are less obsessive than monotonous. When EC present us with an Easter Egg in DON'T COUNT YOUR CHICKENS we know something frightful is hatching, and as drawn by Orlando it's effectively alien. (Interesting to recall that shortly afterwards similar monsters began to appear in Corman's films: one wonders). But despite the atypical EC image of horror emerging from the cliches of innocence, it's only competent as a tale.

More ECs are to come.

They seem to me to be a major event in comics publishing, and you can't support them more effectively than by subscribing. Unfortunately, East Coast Comix seem to be on the move, and I'm awaiting confirmation of their subscription address. When I have it I'll pass it on.

And so to new developments. The last few years have seen the Comics Code eroded to a point where some of the original EC tales would be acceptable within it. Not before time, but there's a long way to go. Meanwhile, let's see what's being achieved, in the context of a bunch of comics which have recently reached me through the mysteries of British distribution.

The DC mystery comics have the head start of Joe Orlando as editor. He's remembered what he learned at EC and is putting it increasingly into practice. There are mistakes: the hosts who usher you through the DCs would shrink timidly from their EC counterparts, and sometimes they're allowed to interrupt the story to no effect except hindrance, as in IN HIS OWN IMAGE (HOUSE OF MYSTERY 213). Or the sometimes over-ambitious page layouts: EC knew what they were doing when they broke down each page into three ranks of stiffly formalized rectangles - it prevented the eye from anticipating, which is what goes wrong with Payne's LAST RITUAL, LAST RITES (HOM207), whose impressively gruesome climax is visible long before you reach it, since it sprawls across the preceding panel. But there are merits, and they're worth paying for.

Often they start with the cover, particularly if it's drawn by Wrightson. Sometimes the covers are dishonest, in that they combine elements from a story to promise a scene not offered within. (HOM 217 is a particularly blatant offender). But the covers are often so effective in their own right that perhaps they should be read in the way the one for HOM 213 demands: as a one-panel horror story.

Then there are the stories. It's a gamble; some issues are weak throughout, but most contain at least one worthwhile piece. Recently there's been HOODOO YOU TRUST? (HOM 217), with a neatly ironic ending; THE CURSE OF THE CROCODILE (HOM 219), which avoids the obvious payoff and adds an obliquely macabre touch of the appropriate in its final line; THEY HUNT BUTTERFLIES, DON'T THEY? (HOM 220), whose grisly climax demonstrates the liberalization of the Comics Code.

HOUSE OF SECRETS had an especially good and uncompromising issue in 109, which is probably still around if you look. MUSEUM OF NIGHTMARES is drawn by Alcala, whose careful, essentially naturalistic style recalls Orlando's, particularly when registering shock. Its surreal payoff is unnerving. AND IN DEATH THERE IS NO ESCAPE has art by Nino, the most grotesque of the DC mystery artists. At its best his delirious expressionism recalls Ingles'. However, he seems to suffer from the same limitation as Gerald Scarfe: to him everything looks grotesque. Still, this story contains his most powerful images to date, in particular the progress of the poison on p.12 and the hideously gruesome ending.

I have a special affection for CURSE OF THE DEMON SPAWN (HOS 112), largely because of Gerry Conway's script, a parody of Sherlock Holmes with a deadpan hilarious ending. In the same issue's first story, THE WITCH-DOCTOR'S MAGIC CLOAK, the EC reticence in the face of grue is back, but one wishes for Ingles to draw the climactic multiplication of limbs.

UNEXPECTED isn't always. Nonetheless it tries, and recently A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE MORGUE (in 148) only needs an explicit final panel to take us back twenty years. It also has the virtues of terseness and narrative drive, EC virtues which I fear aren't always present in the DC equivalents.

But the pleasant shock of the year is PLOP's first issue. Not all of it, I hasten to add: it consists largely of weak sick jokes and page space filled up with injunctions to laugh, which don't persuade me at all. But it's essential buying for the last item, THE GOURMET, in which Skeates and Wrightson virtually take on the Comics Code all by themselves. It could almost be a joke until the final grisly page. It's a reversal of the EC situation: EC used MAD to preserve some of their integrity in the face of censorship, DC use PLOP to slip in their most extreme horror story to date. Nobody but Wrightson could have made it coherent, but it's enough to keep me watching what DC may do next.

And Marvel? Sadly, their mystery comics (at least those which are distributed in Britain) seem to contain only reprints, most of them wholly embarrassing. As of March, of course, we're to be denied all Marvels. I trust we won't see dealers taking advantage of this, as some have with Marvel's black and white comics. The other week I saw some of these 75¢ comics on sale during their cover-date month at the ridiculous price of £1.50. If anyone would like to try justifying that, go ahead. Meanwhile I'd advise buyers to try elsewhere; there are dealers who don't charge that kind of price.

As for the black and whites - well, they're variable. Broadly speaking, I'm disappointed that they should give so much space to what are basically superhero antics unrestrained by the Code. (Mind you, I'm not comparing

them to the over-reactive excesses of HIS NAME IS SAVAGE). Warren do the same thing with Vampirella, but at least that's only one story per issue. However, some stories do work: in LOOK HOMeward VAMPIRE (DRACULA LIVES 4, a comic even more seriously trammelled by the inclusion of Dracula at the centre of all the stories) Gerry Conway's script includes the perverse notion of a vampire priest, Dracula's wrathful national pride is to the fore, and amid the congested blocks of black ink Alcazar's outlines are delicate. Conway's subversive ideas are more stimulating in KISS OF DEATH (VAMPIRE TALES 3), where Satan's daughter and her cohorts are far more sympathetic than a commercialized religious moralist, even though Maroto's art doesn't hide the decay Satana's kiss produces. (Not that any of this is particularly subversive today, but it may be a step toward multiplex thought for its intended audience).

Oddly some of the stories are old-fashioned in the wrong sense. An adaptation of Derleth's BAT'S BELFREY (VAMPIRE TALES 3) communicates a growing sense of subterranean menace but topples into absurdity as the narrator scribbles on describing the vampire's teeth in his throat. (It may be in the original story, but so what?) And FEAR STALKER (DRACULA LIVES 4) is only partially redeemed by Mike Ploog's art from its loud-mouthed moral tone. "Think soundly... as you race from the girl you claimed you cared for", a caption accuses a character. It may be a Victorian tradition but that's hardly an excuse.

However, there are better things at Marvel. The Gerber-Marcos WHEN THE GODS CRAVE FLESH (TALES OF THE ZOMBIE 3) is brutally frightening and horrific, despite the presence of a series character (or maybe because of: he's pretty frightening himself.) And SAVAGE TALES 2 and 3 more than live up to their title, with generous helpings of Barry Smith, whose delicate style has never precluded primitivism or terror. He excels himself in his portrayal of Tolkemec at the end of RED NAILS, the Conan tale which runs across both issues and is as fine as anything Smith has done.

And what of Warren, who began the horror comic renaissance? The Spanish artists are in occupation, but happily with little of the garish pastel pretentiousness that sank NEL's DRACULA. They are especially welcome in VAMPIRELLA, where their grace of line is most appropriate to that comic's celebration of the female. Nowhere more so than in Maroto's WOLF HUNT, (VAMPIRELLA 27, the latest I've seen) a beautifully erotic and romantic adult fairy tale. There is a central colour section by Gonzales, but it's as unnecessary to the appeal of the comic as the cut-out game on the inside cover. VAMPIRELLA at its best is the logical and alluring culmination of Frazetta's visions of womanhood. And that brings us back just about where we came in.



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